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"Angela Su proudly presents: Lauren O — The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time"

BY HG MASTERS



Installation view of ANGELA SU's "Angela Su proudly presents: Lauren O — The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time" at M+, Hong Kong, 2023. Photo by Lok Cheng. Courtesy M+.

Angela Su: "Angela Su proudly presents: Lauren O—The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time"

M+

Hong Kong

Jun 9–Oct 8, 2023

Changing reality, and society in the process, requires altering our consciousness. This premise— widely interpreted by religions, philosophers, and political scientists throughout history—took on particular resonances in 20th-century social movements that sought to overcome hegemonic or imperial powers. In the project that artist Angela Su developed for the Hong Kong Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, and subsequently elaborated in a second exhibition at M+ in 2023, she conjured the figure of a mysterious circus performer known as Lauren O, who skirted through subcultures on the fringes of societies undergoing rapid, revolutionary changes. Su's homecoming show at M+, "Angela Su Proudly Presents: Lauren O—The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time," constructed the world of this parafictional persona and their reflections on survival and resilience during social upheaval.



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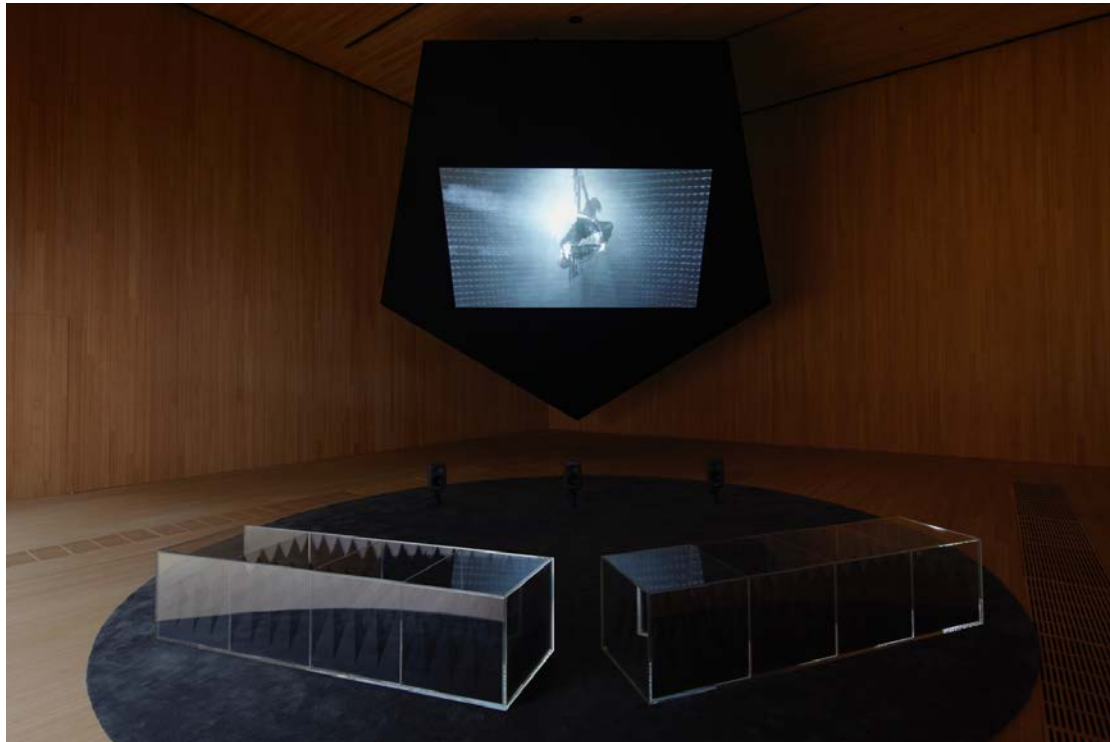
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Lauren O was drawn to levitation: an ability as much imagined as potentially real; an act of an individual's willpower to overcome Newtonian physics; and an idea with corollaries to the modern dream of flight or movement in zero gravity. In *The Magnificent Levitation Act of Lauren O* (2022), a 15-minute video at the heart of her project, Su narrates Lauren O's story, from membership in Laden Raven, an anarchist group of vaudeville performers to her involvement with anti-Vietnam War protesters in the United States, who in 1967 attempted to levitate the military headquarters known as the Pentagon. Su's video is a social history, with Lauren O initially appearing only as a passing reference in the voiceover accompanying archival film clips of gravity-defiers, from 19th-century balloonists to vaudeville performers, tightrope walkers, and Soviet space explorers. The video later connects the perils of flight to emotional breakdowns and journeys into the recesses of the mind, featuring clips of emotional breakdowns and 1960s psychedelic raves. The heady era of exploration leads to collapse and Lauren O eventually retreats to the Esalen Institute in northern California, where she reflects that the generational fixation to "self-transform" might just be another "illusion that turns into a weapon of disempowerment."



SHOWS
Progre
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Installation view of ANGELA SU's *The Magnificent Levitation Act of Lauren O*, 2022, single-channel video with sound: 15 min, at M+, Hong Kong, 2023. Photo by Lok Cheng. Courtesy M+.

After we read about the eventual imprisonment of Laden Raven members, at the film's climax, Lauren O (played by Su) appears for the first time. The film's narrator—seeming to channel Lauren O—reflects that now the masses should "quietly wait for our time to rise again, to lie flat, eat dirt, and sleep"—phrases evocative of the 2020s as much as the 1970s—before depicting the character hoisted into the air in a *kinbaku*-esque pose, spinning slowly in the dark before the silhouette transforms into a giant '70s-style disco ball, scattering glimmers of light in all directions.

Metaphorically depicting Lauren O as a disco ball allows Su to offer only partial glimpses of the protagonist, who meanwhile illuminates her social world. Viewers could read from the wall of more than 200 compulsively scrawled diary pages that visualized Lauren O's involvement in 1960s-era American hippie counterculture and her fascination with the geodesic domes of utopian architect Buckminster Fuller. Dovetailing with Lauren O's levitation was her interest in multisided, non-Euclidian forms, which manifested in hundreds of geometric models—ranging from complex solid forms to see-through framed shapes—that were arranged on a giant X-shaped table. These *Study Models of Polyhedra* from the 1960s and '70s, which Su claimed to have found at the Esalen Institute, reflected Lauren O's interests in questioning how to break away from rigid constraints of the Platonic solids and societal norms at large.



Installation view of **ANGELA SU's** *Laden Raven*, 2022, hair embroidery on fabric, 290 × 140 cm.
Photo by Lok Cheng. Courtesy M+.



Detail of **ANGELA SU**, *Museum of the Trembling Conspiracy of the Murder of Ravens*, 2023, hair embroidery on light box. Photo by Lok Cheng. Courtesy M+.

Su's own responses to Lauren O's archives were echoed in several embroidery works made with human hair. The largest, a three-meter-wide banner titled *Laden Raven* (2023), depicts an outstretched bird form with the bones and muscles of human hands and that carries a human embryo in its belly, symbolizing a monstrous hybrid. More bird imagery appeared in smaller hair-embroideries of the series *Museum of the Trembling Conspiracy of the Murder of Ravens* (2023), which features the collective nouns for birds—such as "Siege of Herons," a "Mob of Emus," or a "Murder of Crows"—that, in English, reflect the threat humans feel from these large gatherings. This latent anxiety of large congregations is etymologically embedded in the English language itself, Su suggests. Like much of her parafictional project about mass social movements in the 20th century and their dreams—both realized and crushed—analogies could be drawn to the recent history of Hong Kong, but this potential was neither overt nor overdetermined.

Many visitors were preoccupied with the question of whether Lauren O is real. In the way Su "presented" Lauren O—as in the exhibition's title—the character's historical facticity hung suspended in the air like a disco ball, reflecting the inquiring light in myriad directions rather than revealing her as either real or fictional. The identity of the individual, if there was one, or perhaps there were many like Lauren O, in history and in the present, is not the issue—for she became just real enough.

HG Masters is ArtAsiaPacific's deputy editor and deputy publisher.